

Panhandle Health District

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HIV Tests Give Results in 15 Minutes

By Cynthia Taggart
Panhandle Health District

Treats are for more than Halloween and children. This season, Panhandle Health District (PHD) has treat bags for adults ages 18 to 64. And PHD's treats won't cause tooth decay or obesity.

Each mini-bag from PHD includes a condom, breath mint and a card with information about available HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) tests that yield results in 15 minutes.

"Tests used to take two weeks to produce results," says Donna Marshall Holden, who coordinates PHD's sexually transmitted disease and HIV program.

PHD wants people to know the rapid tests are available because the number of people in northern Idaho testing for HIV is dropping.

"We have become complacent," Holden says. "Studies show HIV can be a chronic disease and people don't think it will happen to them. They don't take the necessary precautions. Testing isn't important. We're seeing apathy."

As of the end of June, Idaho had on record 933 reported cases of people living with HIV. Of those, 114 live in the five northern counties. Last year, 209 Panhandle residents tested for HIV through the health district, a paltry amount considering more than 200,000 people live in northern Idaho.

To encourage more testing, PHD has lowered the price of its tests and promoted the new rapid testing process. Holden believes that the two-week wait for test results in the past was stressful and discouraged people from starting the testing process.

"The waiting drives people crazy. They can't eat, sleep," says Mary Petty, a PHD registered nurse who gives HIV tests. "The fact that we can give answers in a short period of time is crucial."

The rapid HIV test is similar to a pregnancy test, using blood instead of urine. A nurse pricks the patient's finger and collects a few drops of blood in a small cassette. The test looks for antibodies in the blood. If it finds HIV antibodies, blood will be drawn from the patient for a second test to confirm the positive results.

Early detection reduces the risk the patient may unknowingly spread HIV.

"Studies show people who know they're HIV-positive take more precautions," Holden says.

It also enables patients to start medications before the virus runs rampant. An early start to medication helps the immune system continue to function at full strength.

The risk of HIV doesn't seem to concern people much anymore, Holden says. She speaks to high school students about HIV, AIDS and STDs and they indicate to her that HIV is a problem in Africa or primarily a gay man's disease.

"They don't realize that viruses and bacteria find new ways to mutate," Holden says. "AIDS is a fragile virus. It has to have the right conditions. Still, look at all the people infected."

HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. It's passed on through contact with the blood, semen, vaginal fluids or breast milk of an infected person. Unprotected sex with an untested partner places a person at high risk of HIV exposure. Sharing syringes and needles can expose a person to blood infected with HIV. Infected women can pass the virus to their babies during pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding.

A long-term, monogamous sexual relationship with a tested partner is the best prevention to HIV exposure. Latex condoms and not sharing syringes and needles also offer protection.

People may be infected with HIV and not know it. HIV-infection doesn't exhibit visible signs and it may take years to develop into AIDS. An HIV test is the only confirmation that a person is not infected.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 25 percent of the 1.2 million people infected with HIV are unaware of their infection. That means about 300,000 people don't know they're passing on the virus that causes AIDS.

PHD wants a better sense of how many of those people live in northern Idaho. That's why it applied for and received a state grant to start the rapid HIV tests at each of its offices in the five northern counties.

"We've already seen our testing numbers increase in two weeks," Holden says.

When Spokane Regional Health District started the rapid HIV tests in 2006, its test volume increased by 30 percent. PHD expects its number of HIV tests to climb by 20 percent this year, providing a clearer picture of HIV infection in the Panhandle.

"As a health care professional, it's extremely satisfying to say, 'No, you don't have HIV,'" Holden says. "That's why we're doing the kits with condoms and cards about the rapid tests. We're trying to get the word out that tests are quick and easy and it's so much better for you to know."

HIV rapid tests at PHD cost from \$35 to \$55, depending on income. For information or an appointment, call 415-5270.